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ABSTRACT

In any consideration of the ways in which intergenerational child care meets the needs of parents and children, attention should be given to the needs of the older persons who are involved in significant numbers in the child care work force. Individuals over the age of 65 account for 25 percent of U.S. family day care providers, 13 percent of other child care workers, and 7 percent of preschool teachers. Given these numbers, the following questions are appropriate: (1) Why is child care an appropriate field of work for older persons? (2) What criteria need to be met if child care is to be an appropriate field for the older worker? (3) What are the options for older persons in child care? (4) What are the anticipated outcomes for older workers in child care? Discussion provides responses to these questions and a description of an intergenerational child care demonstration model designed to empower older workers to participate in the development and management of a self-functioning, solvent child care program. The model involves 15 children and a staff of five adults, all of whom are over 55 years of age. In 1987, of 108 older adults completing their first year of participation in an intergenerational child care program, 67.6 percent reported improvement in their feelings of being valued, 63.9 percent reported improvement in their feelings of happiness, and 54.6 percent reported an improvement in satisfaction with life. (RH)

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WHO WILL CARE FOR OUR CHILDREN

A paper presented at the

Association for Gerontology in Higher Education

Annual Meeting

Tampa, Florida

March 4, 1989

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Who Will Take Care of Our Children

"Who will take care of our children?" is a major public policy question in the United States. Increasingly, the answer to this question is "the elderly." With the public realization that 60% of America's families need child care and that the current child care system is vastly inadequate in quantity and quality, it is no surprise that during the 1988 presidential campaign no fewer than six candidates made recommendations for child care legislation. Within each of the candidate's recommendations were intergenerational components designed to contribute to the growth and development of young children while enhancing the quality of life of older persons.

The notion of older persons as child care workers appeals to young parents who because of fragmentation, instability, and work schedules need the support and nurturing that older persons can provide to their children and themselves.

However, as we consider parents and children in intergenerational child care, we also need to concern ourselves with the older persons, who according to the New York Times (1987) are already involved in significant numbers in the child care work force. In fact, individuals over the age of 65 account for 25% of the nation's workers in family day care, 13% of other child care workers, and 7% of pre-school teachers. Given that information, we might ask questions such as the following: Why child care as a field of work for older persons? What criteria are necessary for child care to be an appropriate field for the older worker? What are the options for older persons in child care? What are some anticipated outcomes for older workers in child care?

Why Child Care

The nurturing of a family's young can yield for many older persons deep personal satisfaction; satisfaction in the knowledge that they are contributing to the growth and development of another generation, satisfaction with the recognition that their insight, skills, and experiences are valued by their young families and finally, satisfaction from the physical, emotional and psychological stimulation associated with the nurturing of young children.

Criteria for an Appropriate Older Worker Workplace

In addition to offering older persons a unique role as nurturer, child care centers can satisfy many of the criteria for an appropriate workplace for older workers. According to reports from the Policy Center on Aging (1987) and American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) (1988) these criteria are important because they promote worker productivity and a sense of well being. The workplace should:

- utilize older persons' existing strengths, skills and knowledge;
- integrate work with continued learning that includes formal training/retraining programs;
- engage older persons as active participants in a flexible environment;
- provide structured and definable experiences that offer a diversity of tasks;
- provide a support system for the older worker which reinforces growth, creativity and productivity; and
- build confidence and enhance self-esteem by providing recognition and rewards.

Child Care Options

Currently there are three basic child care models that involve the older worker and meet the criteria important for the older worker. The models include:

- older persons as family day care providers;

- older persons as aides working with young staff in child care centers; and

- older persons as the only staff in child care centers.

To demonstrate how some of the older worker criteria can be integrated into a child care environment, I will describe Side by Side, a new child care program that illustrates the last of these three models.

Child Care as an Appropriate Workplace for Older Workers

Side by Side is an intergenerational child care demonstration model designed to empower older workers to participate in the development and management of a self-functioning, financially solvent child care program. Housed at Pittsburgh's Point Park College, an urban liberal arts college with a children's school integrated into its education department, Side by Side is funded by the American Association of International Aging (AAIA) and The Buhl Foundation. The three-year project involves collaboration between Generations Together of the University of Pittsburgh and Point Park College's Education Department. Upon completion of the grant, Side by Side will become a special program offered at the Children's School.

The model involves 15 children and a staff of five, all of whom are over 55 years of age. The staffing includes a head teacher and manager, a fiscal manager, a teacher and two aides. In addition, during the first year a program coordinator is collaborating with the staff in the program's development.

Side by Side has as its goals:

- To design and implement a self-functioning model of intergenerational child care in which the primary care givers are skilled older persons over 55 years of age;

- To integrate a curriculum on aging into a standard child development curriculum;

- To research and evaluate the implementation of the model; and

- To replicate this model into other settings.

Side by Side creates an appropriate work environment for the older worker. It includes:

- a team effort in the development of the model;
- use of diversified skills in order to create a safe and rich environment;
- training for all staff on curriculum, child development, and management issues;
- establishing realistic roles and responsibilities for each staff member;
- flexibility in the scheduling in order to meet the needs of the staff;
- salaries for the older worker that are comparable to those of younger staff in other child care settings;
- the creation of an environment in which learning can occur by the staff as well as by the young child; and
- opportunities for the staff to participate in the program's maintenance and future.

Our Experience to Date

After seven months of operating Side by Side we have observed that there are specific programmatic characteristics necessary to create an effective environment for children and elders. It is necessary to:

- select a team of older workers who begin their program involvement at the same time;
- agree upon the philosophy and methodology of the center;
- enable the team members to collaborate in the development of the project;
- meet frequently to establish a sense of camaraderie and colleagueship;
- acknowledge individual skills of the staff; and
- address issues and problems promptly and directly.

Anticipated Outcomes of Older Persons in Intergenerational Child Care

Based upon data from twenty Western Pennsylvania intergenerational child care programs in which older persons were aides or volunteers working with younger staff, we anticipate similar outcomes from the Side by Side model.

In 1987, of 108 older adults completing their first year of participation in an intergenerational child care program, 67.6% reported improvement in their feelings of being valued, 63.9% reported improvement in their feelings of happiness, and 54.6% reported an improvement in satisfaction with life. These responses suggest that, in a program where elders are the sole staff, we can anticipate an increased level of improvement in their feelings of self confidence, happiness, life satisfaction and of being valued. In addition, the elders-only model can lead to increased levels of social contact and skill development.

The intergenerational component of child care can become a vital force in addressing the needs of America's young families, their children and older persons. A positive and creative approach to "Who Will Care for Our Children" requires considerations for the elders who may become the care givers for our children. Considerations such as those in programs like Side by Side are essential as we plan a comprehensive response to our child care needs. While we can paint a negative scenario of a field that can abuse, take advanatage of, and lack consideration for the needs of this new population of caregivers, a more positive thoughtful approach can improve the quality of life for our elders and our children. Therefore to address the question "Who will care for our children?" let us also address the parallel question, "How do we care for the care givers of our children?"

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